



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

Written Evidence to the
Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
Inquiry into the Barroso Task Force

This document has been prepared by The Centre for Cross Border Studies as a contribution to the Inquiry into the Barroso Task Force being undertaken by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.¹

About The Centre for Cross Border Studies

The Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, has a strong reputation as an authoritative advocate for cross-border cooperation and as a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across borders on the island of Ireland, Europe and beyond.

The Centre empowers citizens and builds capacity and capability for cooperation across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries on the island of Ireland and further afield. This mission is achieved through research, expertise, partnership and experience in a wide range of cross-border practices and concerns. A significant amount of its work has been enabled through EU funding (principally PEACE and INTERREG).²

In Summary, the Centre for Cross Border Studies considers that:

1. The European Commission's Northern Ireland (Barroso) Task Force has provided **privileged and timely access to a wide range of European Union policy areas** and, crucially, to informed channels dealing with the formulation and management of European Union funding programmes. This has offered policy makers and drivers in Northern Ireland the **potential for exploiting invaluable EU support to improve socio-economic indicators** and to bring them into line with better performing European regions.

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² For further information, please visit www.crossborder.ie.

2. The Commission's Northern Ireland Task Force offered the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Executive a **clear and wide-ranging set of areas in which the EU could assist** in enabling Northern Ireland to make a successful transition from a European region that had been receiving significant amounts of structural funds. A number of recommendations were also made by the Northern Ireland Task Force arising from its exploratory work.³
3. The Northern Ireland Task Force underlined **the importance of cross-border cooperation and joint Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland governmental efforts in addressing problems common to both jurisdictions**, and in contributing towards peace and stability on the island of Ireland.
4. The Barroso Task Force Working Group (BTWG) has assisted to a significant extent in bringing a **greater degree of focus to the engagement of the Northern Ireland Executive and, above all, individual Departments with the European Union** and to the task of maximising the benefits Northern Ireland may derive from that closer engagement. This is particularly evident in relation to efforts aimed at increasing the draw-down of competitive EU funding (however, see 5 below).
5. The BTWG has **not achieved a sufficient degree of imprint in its outworkings, especially in terms of its outward facing contacts**. This undermines its efforts as it becomes difficult to attribute directly to the Group's activities positive outcomes achieved by a wide variety of agents (governmental and non-governmental) in terms of EU engagement.
6. Conceptual, procedural and **chronological problems in the setting of objectives do not readily permit an accurate consideration of specific outcomes and their relational nature to those objectives**. Given those problems, whilst it may be possible to state that the target for the draw-down of EU funds will be achieved, for instance, it is not really possible to indicate precisely how that positive outcome maps onto individual objectives that are often framed as discrete tasks (such as the organisation of a specific number of seminars).
7. By addressing the concerns outlined in 5 and 6, and by using this Inquiry as an important part of a critical but forward-looking audit of the Barroso Task Force and the BTWG that captures their positive experiential outcomes, **the Northern Ireland Executive can ensure that the channels of communication that have been opened up with Brussels, and the knowledge that a range of officials from various government departments have gained since the Task Force was brought into operation, can be profitably maintained in the post-Barroso era**.

Each of these issues will now be considered in greater depth.

³ Commission of the European Communities, 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force' (07/04/2008); Commission of the European Communities, 'Commission Staff Working Document on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force' (07/04/2008).

1.

The Barroso Task Force:

“a new and closer partnership between Northern Ireland and the Commission”⁴

There is ample evidence to support the conclusion that the creation of the Barroso Task Force has provided Northern Ireland with additional opportunities to access key decision-makers in the European Commission, resulting in important channels of communication that simultaneously allow for EU policy to be closely informed of the region’s specific needs and for relevant information on EU initiatives and funding programmes to be fed back to Northern Ireland in a timely manner.

Recognition of this can be seen in the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment’s strategy for maximising draw-down from the Horizon 2020 programme, for example. Having identified that ‘Access to early information, key networks/partners and the ability to disseminate these details to parties within NI is critical to the ambition of increasing NI’s innovation performance’, the Department states that it will do this by ‘Working in partnership with the Barroso Task Force [...] to ensure that Northern Ireland secures access to specific Commission working groups’.⁵ Central to this process since their appointment in 2012 are the four Barroso Task Force Desk Officers who, in accordance with their respective thematic responsibilities, have been alerting Executive Departments to information relevant to them as it has arisen in Brussels. That information can then be disseminated, where appropriate, to external organisations and potentially allowing them to exploit opportunities that can contribute to the achievement of the Northern Ireland Executive’s European Priorities.

The existence of the Barroso Task Force has also accelerated the channelling of information from Northern Ireland to the European Commission, allowing the latter to reach speedier decisions in relation to matters of concern to the Northern Ireland Executive. This was illustrated recently by an OFMDFM official in a departmental briefing to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in which he stated:

“Without having broken the rules, the Commission will give priority to considering issues that are of importance to us. One example that comes to mind is that of state aid in the funding of Bombardier. We managed to get a Commission decision on that relatively quickly, and I am confident that the task force was important in that regard and it continues to be so in getting us access to meetings and officials and decisions on a shorter timescale than might normally apply”.⁶

⁴ ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force’, p.1.

⁵ DETI, ‘Horizon 2020: Northern Ireland Action Plan 2013’, p.5.

⁶ Hansard, ‘Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister – European Union Priorities 2013-14: Departmental Briefing’, 29 January 2014.

The Barroso Task Force represents a direct and speedy channel to the European Commission that places Northern Ireland in a comparatively privileged position, and one that must not be underexploited.

2.

The Task Force's Recommendations:

“The Commission looks forward to the implementation of these important European programmes, with the prospect that Northern Ireland will become an example of best practice in the EU”⁷

Since the Barroso Task Force compiled its original report in 2007/08, the context in Northern Ireland and in Europe generally has undoubtedly changed due to the financial crisis and the resulting economic downturn. Similarly, the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government is no longer the same since its objectives have had to address the effects of a depressed economy. Nevertheless, much of what that report contained and its overall ethos still remain valid, as does the assessment made by the Executive and the conclusion that it reached:

“The Task Force Report [...] contains many direct practical suggestions as to how Northern Ireland might improve its relationship with the European Union. It gives us unique assistance in documenting the range of policies, schemes and initiatives in the European Union; many of which Northern Ireland has little history of participating in. Taking these opportunities is our responsibility”.⁸

The report is comprehensive in its analysis of the socio-economic realities of Northern Ireland within the context of a European Union framework of measures and tools capable of altering those realities. However, it is also mindful from the outset that its overarching purpose is to support the Barroso Task Force in assisting Northern Ireland to transition successfully through a period in which ‘the region's long period as major recipient of European regional aid is gradually phased out, and where it will increasingly rely on its own resources’.⁹ In order to do this, and integral to its aim of supporting the peace process, the European Commission placed particular emphasis on how the Task Force was to assist in ‘helping the region in its efforts to improve its economic competitiveness and to create sustainable employment for its people’, and ‘to generate more growth and jobs in line with the Union's overall Lisbon Strategy’.¹⁰

It is to point towards the fulfilment of these broad objectives that the Task Force's report set out a significant number of specific objectives (phrased as “suggestions and

⁷ ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force’, p.4.

⁸ Northern Ireland Executive, *Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008-2009*, p.6.

⁹ ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force’, p.1.

¹⁰ ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force’, p.1.

recommendations”) for a range of policy areas, including agriculture and rural development, education, employment, and enterprise. The Northern Ireland Executive’s 2008-2009 Action Plan was ‘the Executive’s formal response to the European Commission’s Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force’,¹¹ and as such could be considered as the first in a series of subsequent Action Plans constituted by the annual European Priorities, which audit progress towards the fulfilment of the Barroso Task Force objectives, although also framed as progress in terms of the relevant Programme for Government.

It is not the intention of the Centre for Cross Border Studies’ submission to the Inquiry to identify each individual recommendation contained in the original Barroso Task Force Report (in the section dealing with agriculture and rural development alone, there are ten general recommendations, with some then containing more specific recommendations within them), and to then provide an assessment as to what extent they have been carried out. Instead, it is important to take into proper consideration the fact that those objectives were set in a significantly different economic context, and that the intervening crisis may have affected the rate of progress in terms of their fulfilment.

3.

The Barroso Task Force and Cross-Border Cooperation:

“We [...] have a history of managing cross-border programmes that is recognised positively by the Commission and other regions in Europe”¹²

Within the European Union and in relation to its citizens, where borders become obstacles to the free movement of people, goods and services, they undermine efforts to achieve greater social, economic and territorial cohesion. Since one of the central aims of the EU, as it is declared in Article 174 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, is of ‘reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions’, impediments to cohesion will be regarded as preventing the proper functioning of the Union. This is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland as a region that has historically suffered from significant levels of disparity in relation to other European regions, as well as to other parts of the United Kingdom, and which the financial crisis helped to exacerbate.¹³

It is in view of these factors that the Task Force Report repeatedly pointed to a cross-border dimension in the approach to improving competitiveness and skills across all sectors. Thus, when addressing the need for Northern Ireland to increase its participation in EU programmes and to raise the skills base, the report suggests that ‘cross-border

¹¹ Northern Ireland Executive, *Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008-2009*, p.4.

¹² Northern Ireland Executive, *Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008-2009*, p.9.

¹³ See OECD, *Regions at a Glance, 2013*, and European Commission, *The Urban and Regional Dimension of the Crisis: Eighth progress report on economic, social and territorial cohesion* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2013).

cooperation mechanisms in the field of skills already in place [...] can [...] contribute to maximise the effect of this policy’ (p.40). Similarly, it pointed to how ‘Animal and plant health should also be considered on the basis of an all-island approach’ (p.33), whilst in the area of the economy and employment, having noted examples of good practice in cross-border cooperation, it recommended that there could be ‘more emphasis on integrated activities in order to decrease obstacles to the mobility of cross-border commuters’ (p.52). Crucially, the report underlined the need for a joint jurisdictional approach to the development of the economy:

“Given its small size and peripheral location, the development of the economy depends on a balanced openness to neighbouring regions, to the rest of Europe and to the rest of the world. In this context, the all-island economy approach clearly represents an opportunity to be exploited and developed in the framework of the European cross-border cooperation programmes” (p.91).

In recent years the Centre for Cross Border Studies has had the opportunity to work closely with a range of organisations and local authorities involved in cross-border initiatives, many of them funded by EU programmes. More recently, the Centre has been assisting a number of local authorities and relevant partners to explore potential cross-border projects related to a variety of areas, including renewable energy, the creative industries, and landscape heritage. In line with the Task Force’s original recommendations, these projects are being designed with the intention of bidding for EU funding.

Indeed, although recognising the fact that ‘Promoting cross-border regional innovation policy is difficult given a number of barriers, including those created by policies themselves’, a recent OECD report on innovation and the regions identifies our own border region as a site where exemplary cross-border innovation is taking place.¹⁴ The report sees InterTradeIreland in particular as playing ‘the key role in implementing cross-border innovation efforts’, and helping to ensure that ‘Cross-border economic cooperation has acquired a high level of legitimacy’ (p.196). Nevertheless, the report’s authors also point out that on the island of Ireland ‘Cross-border flows are below their potential at present in terms of trade, commuting, business networks, access to public procurement, sales of design services, students and tourists, collaboration between research, technology and development (RTD) centres and between these centres and industry’ (p.196).

The Centre for Cross Border Studies considers that the Barroso Task Force, and by extension the Barroso Task Force Working Group, may have contributed to sustaining an environment where a strong base of individual cross-border initiatives are able to prosper. However, there is still space for a more overarching cross-border economic framework that could be supplied by the creation of a Border Development Zone, as outlined in the 2012 Bradley/Best report, *Cross-Border Economic Renewal: Rethinking Regional Policy*

¹⁴ OECD, *Regions and Innovation: Collaborating Across Borders* (2013), p.3.

in Ireland, commissioned by the Centre for Cross Border Studies. This would assist in remedying the unfulfilled potential of cross-border flows identified by the OECD, and represent a significant legitimisation of an all-island economy that was seen by the Task Force as an opportunity to be exploited.

4.

The Barroso Task Force Working Group and Engagement with Europe: “Focusing on influencing and building Northern Ireland’s profile”¹⁵

The existence of the Barroso Task Force Working Group (BTWG) has encouraged the channelling of information and communication with and from the European Commission through a dedicated body, thereby maximising the possibility of achieving a strategic engagement with the EU that will not only increase the likelihood of Northern Ireland profiting fully from that engagement in its current form, but that will also potentially offer a strong platform for the future. Under its thematic structure, the BTWG has placed Executive departments at the forefront of drives to realise European priorities, and has facilitated the regular updating of progress towards the achievement of those priorities.

Moreover, to some extent the BTWG has also brought a greater focus on engagement with the EU and, above all, its funding programmes, to non-governmental organisations. This aspect can be seen in the structuring of the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, which has been organised according to the themes of the BTWG, and brings together a range of governmental and non-governmental agents in pursuit of the Executive’s European priorities.

The degree of focus that the BTWG offers can be seen succinctly in the introductory remarks to the mid-year update on the Executive’s current European priorities: ‘The Executive’s 2013-14 European Priorities maintain the thematic approach established in previous years, identifying 29 objectives to be pursued by the four cross-departmental sub-groups of the Barroso Task Force Working Group’.¹⁶ Focus in this case allows for greater clarity in terms of areas of responsibility and the identification of the tasks to be accomplished. It also regularly places Executive Departments in a position that obligates them to account for their own progress in fulfilling their responsibilities towards the objectives pursued by BTWG’s sub-groups.

Therefore, when the 2013-14 mid-year progress report states that the ‘Thematic Sub-Groups report that 98% of all targets are on track to be achieved or to be achieved with minor delays’, and that ‘30 targets (**27% of the total**) are already fully achieved and none are rated as being at high risk of failure’, it can be presumed that the drive provided by the BTWG is responsible to a considerable degree for such success. Indeed, that success

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Assembly, *Report of the European Project Manager* (June 2013), p.33.

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Executive, *European Priorities 2013-2014 Mid-Year Progress Report*, p.3.

is particularly evident in relation to the target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funding, which currently appears to be on track for being exceeded.¹⁷ Considerable efforts are being made by a significant range of governmental departments, higher education institutions, SMEs, local authorities, and third sector organisations, and it is likely that behind much of this lies the drive supplied by the BTWG. Therefore, where the European Project Manager's 2013 report states that 'Engagement in European affairs should be based on a methodical approach, fully integrated into the systems and procedures of the Assembly rather than on an ad hoc basis' (p.5), it is the Centre for Cross Border Studies' judgements that the BTWG goes some way to providing the desired integration of European engagement into departmental policy-making – if not into the wider Assembly.

5.

The BTWG and External Recognition:

“Increased awareness of its existence [...] would be valuable”¹⁸

Although it is also implicitly suggested on several occasions in the European Project Manager's 2013 report that the BTWG's engagement with Assembly Committees may have room for improvement, it is its involvement with external actors that is of greater concern here. In her response to a request for her views from the Committee for the Office for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Jane Morrice, a member of the European Economic and Social Committee, makes the following comments on how Northern Ireland can sustain its working relations with the European Commission:

“This can be helped by making greater use of the valuable resources on the ground in Brussels and Belfast to keep lines of communication and cooperation open at the political and practical level. The Barroso Task Force is key in this respect and increased awareness of its existence among stakeholders would be valuable”.¹⁹

This lack of awareness amongst *external* stakeholders – i.e. those outside government – extends particularly to the BTWG. Whilst due to the fact that OFMDM co-chairs with Belfast City Council the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, this body (of which the Centre for Cross Border Studies is a member) may be in a privileged position to give due recognition to the roles of the Barroso Task Force and the BTWG, it is doubtful whether other actors may be able to do the same.

¹⁷ See, for example, Hansard, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Programme for Government and Business Plan: OFMDFM Briefing, 26 February 2014.

¹⁸ Jane Morrice, member of the EESC, in her response to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Report on Assembly Committee Priorities for European Scrutiny 2014*, p.112.

¹⁹ Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Report on Assembly Committee Priorities for European Scrutiny 2014*, p.111-12.

Crucially, the initial driving force of the BTWG, and its channels of communication with the European Commission, may in many instances have created the conditions that allow a range of organisations to benefit from EU funding due to their better state of preparedness when applying for funds. Many organisations may also have benefited from direct engagements with relevant actors in Brussels, made possible through the auspices of the BTWG and/or the Barroso Desk Officers. However, these organisations may in many cases not be aware of the role played by the BTWG in supporting their activities, and consequently will not pay due recognition to the BTWG when those activities lead to positive outcomes.

Evidence of this problem can be seen for example in a recent briefing to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister by OFMDFM officials. Questioned by the Chairperson as to their apparent lack of knowledge of the details of the current recipients of EU competitive funding, the officials respond: ‘We are not aware of it centrally, because our locus and interface is the hard tangibles around how much drawdown was secured for the region’.²⁰

In the view of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, this is symptomatic of a structure that encourages a unidirectional flow. The BTWG serves as a focus for all departmental energies on the delivery and enactment of crucial information regarding European funding streams, where the recipients and ultimate enactors of that information are not always aware of the original delivery agent of their information, and therefore are not bound to inform that agent of the results of their actions. Consequently, although some government departments may be made aware of successful funding bids, there is no guarantee that detailed information will flow back to the BTWG or to OFMDFM. This not only means that it is likely that OFMDFM and the BTWG will only have knowledge of the overall total of EU competitive funding received, but also that no detailed trace can be made between the BTWG’s actions and successful individual projects in receipt of funding.

6.

BTWG and the Problematic Setting of Objectives:

“Do you have a preference for the softer, qualitative ones?”²¹

Although, as discussed in Section 2, the original report from the Barroso Task Force contained a range of detailed recommendations, the evaluation of the work of the Barroso Task Force Working Group is complicated by the general lack of appropriate outcome indicators which arises as a consequence of the functional nature of the group’s specified objectives. It is difficult to attribute successes under the NI Executive’s European

²⁰ Hansard, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, European Union Priorities 2013-14: Departmental Briefing, 29 January 2014.

²¹ Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, European Union Priorities 2013-14: Departmental Briefing, 29 January 2014.

Priorities to the work of the BTWG directly (in part for the reasons described above in Section 5); the procedural character of the group's work together with the nature of its role in supporting existing European administrative processes makes a strict determination of the BTWG's effect with regard to concrete deliverables for Northern Ireland difficult. Due to the difficulties in tracing outcomes with clarity to the work of the BTWG, it is not possible to determine in individual instances whether the absence of the BTWG would have any effect on the end result. In other words, can some successful outcomes be due to factors that have no relation to the BTWG – or to the Barroso Task Force?

The objectives themselves, constituted by the annual European priorities, are also undermined by conceptual and chronological difficulties. In terms of the latter, the lack of timeliness in formulation, communication and evaluation of objectives, means that they appear to be published as if they were simultaneously being set, receiving their mid-year progress update, and their final outcomes. As to the former, and taking as an example the objective “*Participate in at least 3 EU themed weeks in Brussels by the end of March 2014*”, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister asks OFMDFM officials:

“I am not disputing that there is a value in participating in EU-themed weeks in Brussels, but, as a target, do you accept that that is an input, and how do you measure the output and the outcome of attending that? Given that you are using taxpayers’ money to run the operation and that improving the economy is at the heart of everything that we do, how does that target, which is actually an input, have a measurable outcome at the end of it?”²²

Setting out the intention to hold a specific number of seminars, for example, represents the mapping of discrete tasks without necessarily making clear what the intended outcomes of those tasks are or how they relate to each other. This in no way means however, that *quantitative* outcomes should take precedence over *qualitative* ones. Indeed, this is the underlying reasoning behind the response to the Chairperson’s questions above:

“A lot of this is qualitative, in that you cannot readily identify the increase in partnerships, consortia, and so on, that results from participation in events such as themed weeks, but undoubtedly it happens. Conversely, if we were not present in Brussels, it is unlikely that we would make contact with potential partners for such projects. Our reputation would not get the enhancement that it has received through our participation in those events. Bear in mind that they are opportunities for us to show off our innovation, our industry and our competitiveness. In a qualitative sense, it is important that we have that opportunity”.

²² Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, European Union Priorities 2013-14: Departmental Briefing, 29 January 2014.

Nevertheless, unless objectives are not framed in a more timely and conceptually sound manner, it will continue to be difficult to properly evaluate beyond the most global terms the change brought about by the Barroso Task Force or, more importantly, the BTWG.

7.

The Post-Barroso Era: “A marathon rather than a sprint”²³

The creation of the Barroso Task Force and of the BTWG, as well as the (perhaps somewhat belated) recruitment of four Barroso Desk Officers, has over recent years provided policy-makers in Northern Ireland with a wealth of information and experience related to the European Union, and particularly of EU funding programmes. The possibility of the discontinuation of the Barroso Task Force should not present itself as a return to the pre-Barroso era, nor should it mean the abandonment of the kind of focus currently provided by the BTWG.

As was made clear in the Northern Ireland Executive’s initial action plan following the report of the Barroso Task Force, it was understood that the forging of productive relationships with the European Union was a long-term project, and therefore it should not be assumed that the departure of President Barroso will mark an end to that process. ‘Relationships’, as that action plan notes, ‘are not built overnight’ (p.6).

The Centre for Cross Border Studies believes that the knowledge, experience and channels of communication that have been created since the formation of the Barroso Task Force should not be needlessly discarded. Instead, and using the current Inquiry as a valuable exercise in identifying existing strengths as well as areas where improvements can be made (some of which have been referred to in this document), that knowledge, experience and those channels of communication need to be maintained within a post-Barroso Working Group.

Although it would be hoped that the European Commission would continue to provide Northern Ireland with the privileged access that has been enabled by the Barroso Task Force, the Northern Ireland Executive has acquired sufficient knowledge and experience to represent our interests in Brussels. The only significant risk to this is if the focus provided by the BTWG were to be abandoned. Consequently, and in order for Northern Ireland to stay in the marathon, the Centre for Cross Border Studies recommends that the BTWG – or its successor – should continue to operate.

²³ Northern Ireland Executive, *Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008-2009*, p.1.